THE ADEQUACY OF AN UNBELIEVING FAITH

March 22, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 am.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 9:14-27

"...I believe; help my unbelief."
-Mark 9:24 (NRSV)

If you are a reader of footnotes, you will, on occasion, learn interesting things. A footnote is a notation at the bottom of a page which tells a reader who is interested where the original source of a writer's information is and sometimes related information which is not essential to the argument or story. Most of us find footnotes a little tedious and don't read them much. Some of us have labored over footnotes in the high school, college or graduate school papers we submitted, maybe even had our wonderful work rejected because the footnotes weren't done properly. Some of us have slogged through pages of heavy reading in which the footnotes occupy the bottom half of every page - like trying to read two books at once, only the print in the second one is much smaller. That's the other thing about a footnote. The print is so small it's almost as if the publisher doesn't want anybody over forty-five to read it.

But if you persist you will discover, in addition to a lot of things you do not want to know, some very interesting insights.

And if you read the footnotes in the Bible, something you really should do because in the Bible footnotes will explain how imprecise the art of translating ancient language can be, and also that there are "textual variations," words or phrases that appear in some ancient manuscripts and not in others. If you read Mark 9:14-27 carefully you will discover in Mark's accounting of what the boy's father said, a tiny letter "q." And if you move over to the bottom of the right hand column, you will find, in tiny, italicized print, a footnote which reads: "Other ancient authorities add 'with tears,'" which means that at least one very old version of the familiar story goes like this.

The father says:

> "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us to help us."

And Jesus says:

> "If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes."

And immediately the father of the boy cried out - <u>with tears</u> -

> "I believe: help my unbelief."

I'll go with the "other ancient authorities" on that one. Of course it was with tears! Think of the humanness, the passion, the poignancy of this situation.

Jesus, Peter, James and John are returning to the others after having been away - on the mountain, in fact, where they experienced the mystery and glory of God in a dramatic way. As they re-enter the small community of his friends and followers, they are brought back to earth abruptly by the sounds of an argument. Scribes - religious officials, are engaged in a noisy debate with his disciples. The text doesn't say so, but my sense is that the Scribes are ahead on points at the moment.

Jesus inquires; a man steps forward out of the crowd, and explains that he has brought his sick son. The disciples have apparently tried to heal him and failed. My sense is that the Scribes ridiculed them, perhaps used the occasion to speak unkindly about Jesus. In any event, the boy was "multiply physically challenged," we would say. He can't hear or speak and it sounds as if he has epilepsy, a condition which was frightening and which the ancient world attributed to demon possession. 99% of the time he's fine - a normal, sunny-faced, energetic eight-year-old. But then, without warning, he has a seizure, and his friends don't understand and run away from him and later make fun of him in the innocent but cruel way children can be. It's frightening. And it's also dangerous because during a seizure he could get hurt, and often has. So his parents watch him like hawks, watch for what they think are warning signs - although they can't be sure when the demon will seize him - and they've never read a book, or talked to a neurologist and there are no support groups for parents, in fact what happens to him doesn't even have a name. So they have organized their life and the lives of their entire family around these occasional terrifying times as best they can. They try not to let him out of their sight but they know that can't go on for ever because he'll be an adolescent before long, and if he doesn't die during one of his seizures, an adult some day - some day when they are not around to help him. So they keep a careful eye out for anyone who seems to have a word of hope, no matter how remote or unlikely or bizarre.

That's why the father is there alone, I presume, because his wife is tending to their other children and he has to do this by himself and that's why he's standing there in this crowd holding his son's hand, feeling more than a little embarrassed, arguing with himself about how really foolish this is because the disci-

ples have tried to help and have failed. And at that very moment, the little boy has a seizure, right there in front of the crowd. So I think the father was certainly kneeling beside him, holding him, when he said so tentatively, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."

And it is also why when Jesus says, "Anything is possible for the one who believes," there is a lump in his throat, and his arms tighten around his son, and tears fill this strong man's eyes because the focus of this experience is suddenly him: the camera, as it were, which had been playing on the crowd, the arguing Scribes and Pharisees, the angry disciples, the little boy standing there curling his toes in the dust self-consciously, Jesus the healer - the camera - the focus - is now on him and, of all things his faith. "All things are possible" if he has it. So he's standing there spiritually naked with his son's future in his hands, depending on his faith, not his physical strength, which he has plenty of, or his resources or his determination, or even his love because he loves this boy enough to die for him, but his faith. He hadn't counted on that. There is no hiding place, no time to sit down and explain what he believes and doesn't believe, how he's struggled with religion all his life, how he goes to Synagogue but finds himself wondering sometimes... how he used to believe passionately in God and God's kingdom, back when he was in love with his people, and with his wife, and with life itself - when he was young. But now with this young son, this dear, vulnerable little boy who did nothing to deserve his condition, he wonders a lot. Did God do this to him? Surely not to the boy, so perhaps to him, a father who was not good enough? Or - is there a God at all? Is there someone actually there? Or is this it, this day, this life?

So he cries out, through his tears,

"I believe: help my unbelief!"

Did you see the lead feature article in the Wall Street Journal last Monday about Duncan Henderson and his son Paul, who called him one night in 1973 and said, "Dad, I haven't been completely honest with you; I'm gay." And then called again in 1989 and said, "Mom, Dad, I got some tests back... I have AIDS." And so the Hendersons, traditional, mid-Western, middle class people, who are as distant from the world of AIDS as that father was distant from the demonic mystery of his son's epilepsy, the Hendersons sold their St. Louis house and moved to Chicago. And a father who was never very close to his son when he was a child for the kinds of reasons fathers sometimes aren't as close to their young children as they could be, Duncan Henderson moved a cot into the bedroom and slept beside his son and took care of him and, when the time came, made the decisions about hospitalization and hospice and dying, and stood beside his son every moment, and who after he died said, "There were things I couldn't help him with when he was growing up. But when he was sick, if he needed turning or needed to be helped to the bathroom, those were things I could do. This was one time I was able to help."

When I read that I thought about that other father standing there in his embarrassment, holding his son's hand in his own and saying, "I believe: help my unbelief."

It's where most of us are, I think. Somewhere between belief and unbelief: or, part of the time belief and part of the time unbelief. Sometimes we spend more time in unbelief, but we are never totally without belief. And sometime we are in belief, but never without the presence of unbelief. In fact, most of us live with a combination, an uneasy truce, a kind of synthesis between belief and unbelief.

We're not alone. Archie Bunker got a lot of knowing laughter by spicing up a Mark Twain quip. Archie was philosophizing on religion and he said, "Faith is believing what any damn fool knows ain't so." [Stages of Faith, James Fowler, p. 32] Twain said it first. So did the Queen in Alice in Wonderland, who has just claimed to be a hundred and one years, five months and one day old. "I can't believe that," said Alice. "Can't you?" said the Queen. "Try again. Draw a long breath and shut your eyes." [see Leslie Weatherhead, The Christian Agnostic, p. 30]

We are not very good at believing what we know can't be true or think can't be true. We are much better at doubting and perhaps in the process we have forgotten how to believe much of anything. It's not a matter of shutting your eyes and trying harder, although aggressive evangelical believers sometimes sound as if it really is all or nothing, that if you have reservations, or serious questions, or doubts, you don't have faith.

And the result is that a lot of people feel somehow consigned to unbelief because they cannot come up with what they think religion calls faith. And that is too bad.

Writing in Theology Today, Hugh T. Kerr tells about trying to help a friend, who had long ago lost her belief and disassociated herself from any formal religion, construct a memorial service for her husband.

> "For her and for many like her, 'the everlasting arms' seems improbable and more a matter of whistling in the dark than stark reality. My friend is trying to put the pieces of her broken life together, but what struck me was the pathos of a person desperately in need of what she once had known, that underneath are the everlasting arms." [Theology Today, January 1992, p. 381]

There are many people - perhaps we are each of us, a little like that - who don't necessarily disbelieve, but can't quite sign up on the dotted line of traditional orthodoxy.

Professor Hans Kung who has written widely about the viability of faith, introduced his important volume On Being a Church like this:

> "This book is written for those -
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> -who do not believe, but nevertheless seriously inquire;
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> -who did believe, but who are not satisfied with their unbelief;
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> -who do believe, but feel insecure in their faith;
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> -who are at a loss between belief and unbelief;
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> -who are skeptical, both about their convictions and about their doubts." [p. 19]

A lot of thoughtful people fall somewhere in those categories enough to make his book a bestseller and Kung himself one of the most important theologians of our time.

Canadian Douglas John Hall adds:

> "No Biblical verse is more existentially meaningful...than the prayer, 'Lord, I believe: help my unbelief.'"[Thinking the Faith, p. 250]

If we follow this a bit further we will see that there are a lot of thoughtful and faithful people who do not agree that faith and doubt, or belief and unbelief are incompatible. In fact, it is amazing how many of the men and women whose faith journeys help so many others, themselves struggled with and continue to struggle with doubt and unbelief.

Rollo May, psychologist, philosopher:

> "The most creative people neither ignore doubt nor are paralyzed by it. They admit it, explore it, and act in spite of it." [see William Sloan Coffin, Courage to Love, p. 7]

The influential Spanish philosopher, Unamuno:

> "Life is doubt,
> and faith without doubt
> is nothing but death."
> [Kerr, op.cit.]

John Donne: poet, preacher, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in the early 17th century:

> "To come to a doubt... is the voice of God in our conscience. Would you know the truth... Doubt, and then you will inquire." [see Madeleine L'Engle, Walking on Water, p. 134]

And my favorite on the topic, Madeleine L'Engle, author, lay-theologian, spiritual resource for thousands of people:

> "We are often taught that it is unfaithful to question traditional religious beliefs, but I believe we must question them continually - not God, not Christ, who are at the center of our lives as believers - but what human beings say about God and Christ."[Ibid, p. 133]

Scripture itself bears witness. Job does not patiently submit to either his suffering or to the orthodox religious explanation of it; instead gives full and eloquent voice to his misgivings and doubt, argues vehemently against the simplistic piety of his friends and his religion. And Jesus himself was doing more than quoting the Bible, when he cried from his cross, "My God, My God. Why?" which is another way of saying: "I believe: help my unbelief."

Doubt and faith are not opposites. Belief and unbelief are not incompatible. It may be that in an honest heart, both exist, side by side, faith needing doubt for the sake of integrity: doubt needing faith for the sake of sanity.

"All things are possible for the one who believes," Jesus said. With tears in his eyes the boy's father said, "I believe: help my unbelief." It was adequate - the adequacy of an Unbelieving Faith. And the question is this: what did he believe? What was his belief that was sufficient?

I think we can rule out doctrinal orthodoxy. This was not a man who could recite all the creeds without crossing his fingers; or like a late friend of mine, a professor of Biology at Ohio State, who used to argue about the Apostles Creed, that he actually didn't believe very much of it, couldn't defend it intellectually and so even for the sake of Presbyterian decency and order wasn't going to drop his intellectual integrity at the church door and say words he didn't believe. So he didn't. He was faithful, generous, a brave member of the community, loved God, loved Jesus, loved his neighbor, but would not say words he didn't understand or believe. "God will have to take me the way I am," he used to say, standing there in defiant silence as he recited the Creed. So I conclude that whatever this man had it wasn't enough orthodoxy to get him ordained or maybe even on the rolls of a lot of churches.

What he obviously had was a lot of heart, a heart full of love for his son. And he obviously had a lot of will and determination to bring his boy to this unlikely and outside chance.

Whatever his belief which was adequate was, it included courage to voice his need, simply, directly and without hyperbole or affectation. "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."

His cry which I believe comes from deep within him, his cry which is an expression of the struggle of an honest heart is for his beloved son's healing, but this time around - particularly after I had just read about Duncan Henderson, age seventy-six, sleeping on a cot beside his dying son - I know that it was a plea for himself; for the strength to go on in case his boy didn't get better, and for courage - the faith - the wherewithal to go on if his son died.

And in his cry, "I believe: help my unbelief," I hear the voice of every one of us.

Perhaps it is why we are here; not in smugness and certainty, surely not to parade our orthodoxy and piety, but quite simply to hear about the adequacy of an unbelieving faith: to hear that even what faith we have, characterized by lots of uncertainty, and more questions than we have ever admitted, let alone asked, full of doubt, faith cluttered, distracted, colored by unbelief, what faith we have - if it brings us here, if it allows us to say simply - "help me;" if it moves us to whisper, "I believe: help my unbelief" - that faith is enough.

It isn't much of a hymn musically. We Presbyterians don't use it much because of its association with evangelical altar calls, but especially in the second verse it is right and true, and I invite you to sing it, or say it, or affirm it deep in the recesses of your soul, deeper actually than either your belief or your unbelief.

"Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt
Fightings and fears, within, without.
O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

Amen.